

6
ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-9

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How the Public Sees The CIA

Having written a book about a 26-year career in the CIA, this reporter has recently completed a tour, arranged by the publisher, of five major American cities. It's not clear yet how many books were sold as a result, but exposure to searching questions in a myriad of TV interviews and radio talk shows provided a unique insight into the current state of the public's perception of our intelligence services.

While demonstrating a refreshing capacity to think for themselves, the large majority of the questioners seemed convinced that at this stage the U.S. has to have an effective intelligence system capable of providing advance warning of impending trouble abroad. The Soviet military buildup has been accepted as an irrefutable reality and with that goes a wide understanding that the country needs to be better informed than ever before.

But if the long retreat from foreign involvement that began with Vietnam and Watergate has ended, those events have left behind abiding scars. Questioner after questioner probed the issue of how the secrecy essential to intelligence collection can be reconciled with an open society and how official secrecy can be prevented from masking domestic abuse or imprudent foreign entanglement.

On this point, the press has evidently done an inadequate job of explaining the significance of recent far-reaching institutional reform. Very few in this large audience understood that President Carter by signing on Oct. 14 the Intelligence Oversight Act provided for a depth of congressional review over intelligence operations that goes beyond anything previously entrusted to the legislature of any democratic nation.

Now embedded in our law is the right of the Senate and House intelligence committees to be kept currently informed on all intelligence activities to which they demand access. Detailed review of all programs by these committees and their suspensive veto over covert action operations are the best possible guarantee against the repetition of presidential abuse of secret power.

In reporting on this crucial reform, the press stressed the fact that it reduced from eight to two the number of committees that had to be informed of covert actions but failed to emphasize that these two committees have now been given the legal teeth necessary to become reliable watchdogs over the executive. There is admittedly a security risk in exposing so much sensitive information to the Congress but it is a risk worth taking in view of the deep public concern over the possible misuse of secrecy.

With the basic issue of congressional oversight now definitively resolved, there remains the question of how Ronald Reagan's advisers are responding to the public support for a foreign intelligence service second to none. The current answer is that these advisers are agreed on the need for strengthening American intelligence but seriously divided on how to do it.

Behind the closed doors of Reagan's intelligence transition team, three young Republican Senate staffers have been arguing that the CIA's performance and morale has sunk so low that only radical surgery can save the patient.

Drawing on ideas first surfaced in a report last year of the Republican National Committee, they are proposing to downgrade the role of the CIA by placing an intelligence czar in the White House staff. The operations directorate of the agency would be established as a separate organization and competing centers for producing national estimates would be created.

A majority of wiser heads on the transition team are opposing these plans for radical reorganization. On the basis of a performance record better than its critics concede, the CIA, they claim, needs to be supported rather than dismembered. The final decision will rest with Reagan's newly-chosen director of central intelligence, William Casey, and those who know him best do not believe that he intends to preside over the dismantlement of the agency he has just been appointed to head.

Casey is enough of an old Washington hand to recognize the wisdom of former CIA Director Richard Helms' advice, "To separate the president's principal intelligence adviser from his control of CIA is like removing the head from the body. A disembodied intelligence adviser cannot compete with the other claimants for the president's time and attention."

Another stabilizing factor is the recent selection by Sen. Barry Goldwater of an experienced intelligence veteran, John Blake, to become staff director of the Senate intelligence committee. With years of service in some of the CIA's top jobs, Blake is likely to look with a skeptical eye on drastic reorganization schemes which are partly motivated by the personal ambition of those who aspire to head the newly-created components.

Meanwhile, professional officers at CIA's Langley headquarters are waiting in some suspense for the outcome. They are encouraged by signs of wider public support and understanding of their work and hope that Casey will supply the continuity of competent civilian leadership that has so long been lacking.